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Introduction to France

Paris, 1936-1941

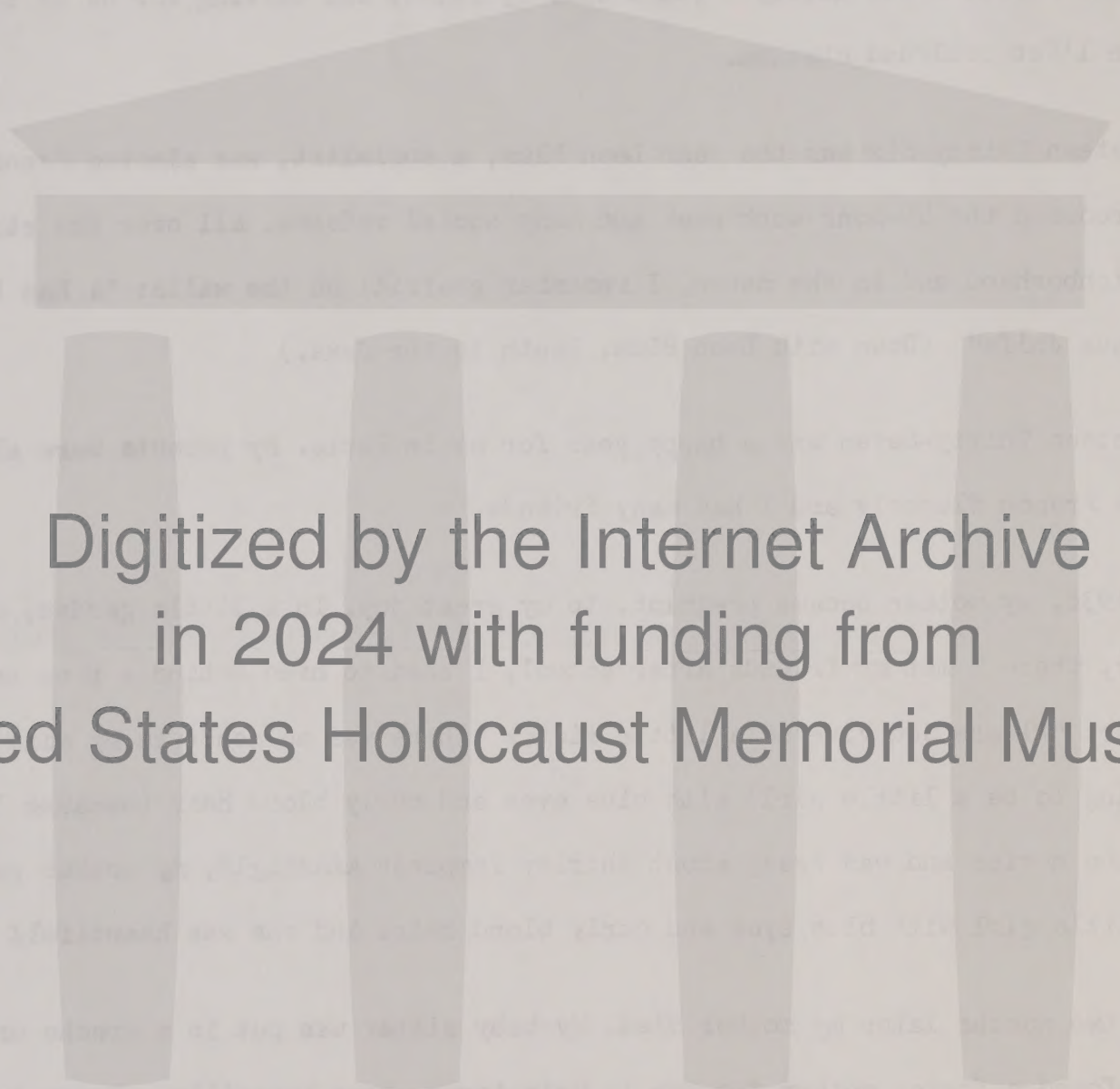
In January 1936, my mother and I left Siedlce for Warsaw where we boarded a train for Paris. I was nearly 9 years old. My father was waiting for us at the Gare de l'Est railroad station.

Nineteen Thirty-Six was the year Leon Blum, a socialist, was elected French Premier. He introduced the 40-hour work week and many social reforms. All over the streets in our neighborhood and in the metro, I remember graffiti on the walls: "A Bas Leon Blum", "Mort aux Juifs" (Down with Leon Blum, Death to the Jews.)

Nineteen Thirty-Seven was a happy year for me in Paris. My parents were alive, I spoke French fluently and I had many friends.

In 1938, my mother became pregnant, to my great joy. In a little garden, on rue de Sévigné, where I met my friends after school, I used to hide behind a tree and make a prayer: "Please God give me a little sister (there was no doubt in my mind that it was going to be a little girl) with blue eyes and curly blond hair (because I used to go to the movies and was crazy about Shirley Temple)" Amazingly, my mother gave birth to a little girl with blue eyes and curly blond hair. And she was beautiful!

But two months later my mother died. My baby sister was put in a creche until my father found a foster mother for her in Coignieres, near Versailles. Every Sunday, father and I went to visit her, until he was arrested on May 14, 1941, "because he was Jewish."



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The Suitcase

Paris, May 13, 1941

When I came home from school, the concierge handed me a letter addressed to my father. It was a summons from the French Police which read: "You are requested to appear tomorrow, May 14, at 8 AM, accompanied by a member of your family, at the Gendarmerie Place Baudoyer." This was the police headquarters of the 4th arrondissement in which we lived. My father was startled. That evening he went to meet his friends, Eastern European Jews like himself. All had received the same summons. I went with my father and listened to their conversations. One said, "I heard that the Germans want to send us to Argentina." Another said, No, I heard that they want to send us to Madagascar." No one guessed what was in store. All of them -- naïve, innocent Jews -- went next morning to the Gendarmerie with their wives. I went with my father because my mother had died a few years earlier.

When we arrived at police headquarters, located in a magnificent 17th century building, the porte cochère was ajar. As we entered, policemen were seated at a long table piled with dossiers. Suddenly two policemen appeared and searched my father for weapons. Then they led us to the courtyard where we were separated: men to the left, women to the right. Toward the end of the morning, we were given instructions to come back within an hour and to bring a suitcase with clothing, a blanket and food for 48 hours for the men who were by then prisoners.

I went home and packed. But when the suitcase was ready, I could not lift it. I was a fourteen-year-old weakling. I ran to friends nearby. From their courtyard I called to Gaby above. She came to the window. Crying, I asked for help. Her brother came down and went with me to carry the suitcase to my father. When we arrived at police headquarters, many buses were waiting to take the prisoners to Pithivers, a camp about 2 hours south of Paris where they were interned. This was the first major roundup of Jews in Paris.

Together with all the women, I waited on the sidewalk until the buses started rolling away. Then I returned to an empty apartment.

Paris, Orleans,
June, July 1941

The Good Samaritan

Castellani

I loved my eight grade teacher, Madame Castellani. She was a Corsican, a tall woman with pepper and salt hair and a swarthy complexion. When she was angry at a student, she yelled, "crrretine," by rolling the rs.

Madame Castellani took the initiative to write a letter to Marechal Petain, asking him to release my father from the Pithiviers camp where he was interned. I and my fellow students signed the letter.

I received a reply from Petain's office in Vichy, stating that the case would be reviewed. A few days later, I was summoned to the police station near me. The police questioned me to verify the contents of my letter to Petain. Then, after a few days passed, another letter from Vichy arrived, this time stating that only the Commissariat General aux Questions Juives (a government bureau of Jewish Affairs in Orleans) could release my father.

Armed with the letters from Marechal Petain's office, I went to see the head of the Commissariat of Jewish Affairs, Xavier Vallat, in Orleans. He told me that he was not able to release my father but that a person at the Kommandantur in Orleans, whose name he gave me, would be able to release him. The Kommandantur was the headquarters of the Germans. Innocently I went there. A German soldier sat at the entrance of the building. I asked for a man whose name I can not now remember. He directed me to the second floor, first door on the right. I knocked on the door. There was no reply. Across the hall was another office whose door was open. A soldier saw me and came towards me. I asked for Mr. X. He looked at me, and, in a low voice, nearly whispering, said, in French: "Mademoiselle, leave this place immediately and don't come back. And he repeated, don't come back." By the tone of his voice I realized that I was in danger and left as fast as I could.

Xavier Vallat was delivering me to the Gestapo. On the same day I had met Satan and an Angel!

After the war, Xavier Vallat was sentenced to ten years in prison. He was released after two years.

Pithiviers, Paris
August 1941

After I failed to obtain my father's release from the Vichy government's office of Jewish Affairs in Orleans, I heard that women, whose husbands were interned in the Pithiviers camp, were going there to bring them food and also hoping to see them. I decided to go also to Pithiviers and try to obtain the release of my father from the Commandant of the camp, by showing him the letters from Marechal Petain's office. The Commandant was not in his office when I arrived. Two French policemen received me and asked me to wait. While I waited, I looked out of the window and, all of a sudden, a group of prisoners, carrying tools on their shoulders, walked by, coming back from the fields. I saw my father among the men and cried out "papa", but he did not hear me. After a while, the Commandant arrived. I told him my story, showed him the letters and asked him to release my father. The Commandant listened, examined the letters and granted a 48-hour pass to my father. It was a victory. Unfortunately a short-lived one. Outside, when the women saw me coming out of the camp with my father, screamed: "Hurray! The girl has her father!"

During his forty-eight hours of freedom, my father should have escaped to the French Free Zone. But he did not have the means to go there. This required identity papers and money and he had neither. There was nowhere he could hide. So, forty-eight hours later, I accompanied my father back to the Gare d'Austerlitz.

He bought a ticket for Pithiviers. In those times, the comptroller punched the tickets at the entrance to the platform. I wanted to go with my father until he boarded the train but did not know that I needed a special ticket to be allowed onto the platform. The comptroller stopped me rudely, and, in the direction of my father, he yelled: "Sale Juif" (dirty Jew).

I saw my father getting farther away and had a foreboding that I will not see him again. Pithiviers was only a transit camp... With the insult ringing in my ear, I took the metro to go "home". Pressing my face on the door, so not to be seen by the passengers, I cried silently.

The Last Supper

Paris, July 16, 1942
Vel'd'Hiv' roundup, the largest,
single roundup of Jews in Paris.

For most of 1942 I stayed in Coignieres, a village about 20 miles from Paris, with my four-year-old sister, in a little country house, a foster home, run by a woman, Francine, and her aged mother. One day, Francine and I decided that we would go to Paris to my apartment to take out some "valuable" possessions, which consisted of some sheets, table cloths, towels and a set of silverware.

Francine's husband had a little truck and the three of us went to Paris on July 16th. When we arrived at my apartment house at 41, rue Vieille-du-Temple, in the heart of the Jewish quarter, a strange atmosphere hovered over the street. People looked stunned and fearful. One could sense that a tragedy had just happened.

I ran to my friends nearby. Gaby and her brother were in the apartment. Their mother, father and sister had been arrested in the middle of the night by the French police.

On the table, there were some plates and cups and a bowl of fruit, from the previous evening's supper. It was their last supper.

They were taken to the Drancy camp, and, eight days later, they were shipped, in cattle cars, to Auschwitz.

Before I left, I picked up a few grapes. On our way back to Coignieres, I felt ashamed that I ate the grapes.

Hotel Dieu (House of God) Hospital

In the second half of 1942, I fell sick with bronchitis and spat blood. I was hospitalized at the Hotel Dieu where I stayed about two months for treatment. Because I was 15 years old and the youngest patient in the ward, the two nurses in charge befriended me.

One day, one nurse came to me and said: "We have learned that the Administration of the Hospital has received instructions from the Department of Police to draw up a list of all the Jewish patients in preparation of a round-up. She asked me to leave the hospital as soon as possible.

I called Francine, the foster mother of my young sister. She came next day to pick me up. We took the train to Coignieres. From the railroad station we had to walk about half a mile to reach her house. She decided not to take the main road but a side road that ran alongside the railroad tracks bordered by fields. She also asked me to crouch down so as not to be seen. I was known in the village as the sister of a little Jewish girl she was raising.

The Shoelace

To Estelle
From Mom, then 15 years old

One morning, in Paris, in the fall of 1942, I decided to visit a friend of my aunt. As I was walking towards my destination, daydreaming to escape reality, ~~when I~~ I heard a voice screaming at me: "Where are you walking?" Coming back to the real world, I saw two policemen standing next to me, then, I looked at the building in front of me and saw the nazi flag flying. It was the Kommandantur the two French policemen were guarding. I replied: "Straight ahead." The policeman who brought me back to reality immediately asked for my papers. As I gave him my identity card he said: "How come you are not wearing your star." I replied: "I am not Jewish." So the second policeman whispered into his ear: "Look at her name."

I was lucky in many ways. First, I had not registered at the police station of my neighborhood as was required of all the Jews, so my identity card was not stamped Juif. Second, I had not gone to the police station to get the yellow star, so I was not wearing a yellow star. And third, I don't remember how I succeeded in changing my first name from Sarah to Suzanne on my identity card, and I was lucky that my surname was written according to the polish spelling. The policeman had difficulty in pronouncing my name. I told him: "I am Polish." He gave me back my identity card and said: "Next time, look where you are walking."

I walked away, my heart pounding. I wanted to run. In order to check my impulse, once I crossed the street, I bent down and undid a shoelace, and then retied it. I recovered some of my calm and decided not to visit my aunt's friend. I was afraid of being followed. I made a turn at the first street and, shaken, returned to my apartment.

Paris, February 1943

Living alone in my parents apartment was difficult. I had no heat, no food. I was toying with the idea of committing suicide. I asked my friends, Gaby and Roger, if I could move in with them. They welcomed me. Their parents and sister had been arrested and deported a year earlier. When the police came for them, they came with a list of people to be arrested. Gaby and Roger were not on the list, a French bureaucratic mistake, But in February 1943:

It was midnight, we were all sleeping. All of a sudden, we were awaken^{ed} by bangs on the door. There had been rumors, a few days earlier, that a new roundup will take place. But we did not act upon this rumor. We decided not to respond. The bangs subsided and we heard steps going away from the door. Gaby and I started to tremble without being able to stop. Roger said: "We must leave the apartment tomorrow morning. And we all fell asleep.

Around 2 or 3 A.M. the police came back and banged again on the door, this time ferociously. Again, we did not respond. Again, we could not control our trembling. All of a sudden, the door started to crack and crack.... and swung wide open!

At the time, we did not know anything about the systematic extermination of our people, but I felt death in the air. I was unable to face the police. I thought I would jump out of my skin. I can't explain the fear that seized me. I slid under the blanket and covered myself entirely. Gaby was brave, she faced them.

The two policemen came into the bedroom and the conversation took place at the foot of the bed where I took "refuge." They said: "You did not hear us knocking on the door?" Roger replied: "No, we were sleeping!..." So they took out their list and only Gaby was on the list. They told her to pack a suitcase and come down with them. Gaby said: "No, I will not go." Roger started to plead with the policemen not to take away his sister. They said: "You will have plenty of company in the courtyard." She answered: "You took my mother, father and sister and I don't know where they are. I will not go." Gaby was then 14 years old. Why did Gaby resist? When she was a little girl, she was befriended by an elderly couple who lived in the building and she used to play in their apartment. I don't know whether these

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people were communists, but the communists warned people not to follow the police and to resist. This elderly couple influenced Gaby on this important matter and it worked. The policemen argued for a while with Gaby and her brother, and then left without her.

I jumped out of the bed. We immediately decided to go up to Mrs. Stampini, a Christian Italian woman who lived two flights up. Trembling and crying, we asked her to hide us. She let us in and we sat in her living-room for the rest of the night. But after a while, she said to Gaby and Roger: "You know, you should remove all the valuables from your apartment. I will watch from the staircase and warn you if the police return." We rushed down to bring up the valuables. The valuables consisted of a set of silverware, some table cloths and a fox neckpiece which belonged to Gaby's mother (it was fashionable then for women, to wear a fox fur on a shoulder). Well, these treasures were enough for this charitable woman to denounce us to the police a few days later! The police did come back, but nobody was in the apartment.

Next morning, after spending the remaining few hours of the night at the Italian neighbour, Gaby went to an uncle who was in hiding near Paris. Roger escaped into Spain where he was arrested and spent some time in prison. After his release, he was able to reach Algeria and enlisted in the French Foreign Legion. I did not know where to go. My only relatives, an aunt and uncle who lived in northern France, escaped to the French Free Zone. So I went back to my apartment.

Once I climbed the four flights, a surprise met me. The door was sealed and I was unable to enter. The police had broken in that night. I started to cry. A shrivelled little woman opened her door and asked me why I was crying. I told her: "I don't know where I will sleep to-night." She said: "You come and stay with me." Her apartment consisted of only one room with a large bed. In the middle of the night, she woke me, poured water on my head and said a prayer. I was baptised. Next morning, I went to look for friends and found two girl friends from school. Very few of my friends were around at the time. Most of them had already been deported. When I returned, the old lady gave me a little box wrapped in paper and tied with a ribbon. It looked like a present. I untied the ribbon and took off the paper. The box was wrapped again and tied with another ribbon. I opened it again and found a handkerchief of mine that I must have dropped. I realized that my wonderful hostess was a disturbed little

lady. I took my few belongings, thanked her for her hospitality and left.

I went back to my friends. I explained to their mother my situation. She asked me to spend the night in their apartment. It was the smallest apartment I ever saw. It consisted of a tiny narrow corridor that led to a kitchen that was not bigger than a closet and to a bedroom where she slept with her two daughters. The father had already been deported. She said she would contact somebody who would help me. She put some blankets on the floor of the corridor and I slept there. Next morning, she took me, by train, to a Paris suburb to a friend, introduced me and left.

The woman, whose husband had been deported too, explained to me that she had found a job for me as a waitress, in a small restaurant, in return for bed and board. The owner taught me the work, and I had a roof over my head and security from the roundups.

The woman who found the job for me and thus saved me, was not able to save herself. Shortly after, she was deported. The mother and her two daughters, my friends, were deported in a later roundup.

The denunciations

Coignieres, 1943

Only in 1992 did my sister tell me about her painful childhood experiences. She lived in a foster home in a tiny village about 20 miles from Paris. The men in this village were all laborers who left in the early hours of the morning to work on farms. The women stayed home and gossiped: they all knew that Francine, my sister's foster mother, was raising a Jewish child. Then came the denunciations. Claudine was four-and-a-half years old and an orphan.

One day, in the summer of 1943, Francine saw from her window two policemen, dressed in black, with rifles on their shoulders, coming towards her house. They were from the French Militia who volunteered to work for the Germans. She rushed to my sister and told her to hide in the hollow step on the second floor. This was the secret hiding place in the house. Claudine ran upstairs and hid in the hollow step. She was a small and slender little girl and fit into the step. The police came in and asked for her. Francine said that this girl does not live here anymore. They searched the house and walked on the step where my sister was hiding. She made no sound. How frightened she must have been! Finally, the police left.

A few months later, she was denounced again. An army truck arrived in front of their house and some Germans soldiers jumped out. They came into the courtyard. Francine and my sister happened to be there. Francine grabbed her hand. The soldiers asked Francine whether this girl was the one they were looking for. Francine replied, "She is my daughter; the girl you are looking for left here long ago." I can imagine the terror that must have shown on her face.

Did they believe her? Or was it compassion? The soldiers left without taking my sister away.

Lille, Lomme, northern
France, 1944

The Liberation

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Soon after my aunt and uncle returned from the French Free Zone, I joined them and stayed with them till the war ended. They had fled to the Free Zone to escape the roundups of Jews that started in Lille. They settled in a quiet suburb of Lille called Lomme, in a small two-story building that was occupied only by us. From a policeman my uncle befriended, he was able to secure false French identity papers, bearing French names, for all of us.

In May 1944, the British started to bomb the railroads in our area, in preparation for the invasion. In the middle of the night, the sirens blasted and we had to run to a shelter nearby, because there was no basement in the building we lived in. One night, while running to the shelter, the sky was lit by flares and it was a beautiful and frightening sight. The railroad tracks were bombed. When we returned to our house, all the windows were blown out. Next day, we read in the paper that 550 French civilians who were living near the tracks had been killed.

Every night, we turned off the lights in the living-room and sat around the radio to listen to a program broadcast, in French, from London, called "Les Francais parlent aux Francais" (The French speak to the French). It was our only link to the free world. The program was always preceded by coded messages aimed at the French Resistance. On June 5th, 1944, the coded messages were broadcast endlessly. Next day, the Allied Armies landed in Normandy.

The Germans started to retreat. The main street in Lomme, where we lived, was a road the Germans took to retreat towards Germany. A curfew was imposed and the streets became deserted. Seeing the German Army retreating was too good a sight to miss. I joined a group of people who were hiding in a doorway, in a side street leading to the retreat route, and, from time to time, we peered out. We saw tanks, artillery and all kinds of military vehicles rolling slowly, in an orderly line. There were also soldiers on foot, with their rifles at the ready. When the soldiers caught us looking at them, they knelt, taking position, and shot into our street.

A day or so later, British and Canadian units were in Lille, being cheered and kissed, and handing out cigarettes and chocolate.

The nightmare was over, but for the Jewish people, the nightmare continued with the revelation of the full horror of the Holocaust.

42673

Paris, May 1945

Immediately after the concentrations camps were liberated, I heard that survivors were arriving from Germany and being housed at the famous Hotel Lutetia. They arrived by truck because no trains were running yet. I went there a few times. A small crowd was waiting outside the hotel. All of a sudden, a truck arrived, and survivors, still dressed in their striped uniforms, stepped down. The crowd applauded. I hoped my father would appear. It was a futile wish.

Lido Beach, New York, June 1997

Fifty-two years later, I learned the details about the fate of my father from the Serge Klarsfeld Association, "Les Fils et Filles des Deportés Juifs de France", whose headquarters are in Paris:

He was shipped from the detention camp in France to Auschwitz on June 25, 1942.

He arrived on June 27th. When he arrived in Auschwitz, the number 42673 was tattooed on his arm. And, on July 24, 1942, three and a half weeks later, he was murdered.

Included with the letter I received from the Klarsfeld office, was a copy of the Auschwitz list on which my father's name appears. The headings are in this order, in German: "Number of tattoo - Name - First name - Date of birth - Place of Birth - Date of death."

I also learned that the Germans recorded, daily, the tattooed number and date of death of the people they killed.

To see the Auschwitz list, with all its detail, is devastating even now, fifty-two years later. For us the survivors, the pain will never end.

My father has no grave. I am writing his story so that his memory may live.

